THE GREAT LEGEND

By Melville Davisson Post (1871–)

IT DID not occur to us to sleep. We sat by a tiny fire made of bleached bones and some handfuls of grasses burned by the sun and as hard as parchment.

We were in the desert south of the Zar'ez. In a vast, motionless ocean of sand; billows of sand like a disturbed sea paralyzed by a stroke of sorcery. The moon filled the desert, the mountains behind us, the waves of sand, the salt bed of the Zar'ez shimmering like a silver disk.

It was all a weird, saffron, devil's color.

The Arabs were asleep about us, each muffled in his burnoose like a mammoth goat fleece. De Morney sat beyond me across the tiny fire. Now and then far out beyond us in this remote, limitless ocean of sand, there came the rolling of a drum; the roll of innumerable, distant drums blended into a faint, indistinguishable, menacing war sound.

The weird thing moved De Morney.

It was a night for any fantastic notion. And the spirit of the Great War that had just closed was on all of us.

"The drums of Imam," he said, and he extended his arm toward the sleeping Arabs. "Every nation has its great legend; its heroic spirit to awaken in the hour of need."

He paused. Then he added: "Is it a dream, or does the thing happen?"

He was a big, heavy, strange man: French crossed deeply with the Oriental. He belonged in the mystery of this desert. He was

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the authority of France in this nomad world. Everybody has heard about him. He held Algeria to the republic through every exigency of the Great War; against every wile of Enver Pasha and his innumerable mad mullahs. Nothing could move him. When you looked at him you thought of a figure in basalt. He sat now on a rug in this desert, his feet under him, his body squat, his face inscrutable, like an Oriental.

"There is truth in the thing," he said—"strange, inconceivable truth in it. Do you know the bronze opposite the Madeleine?"

I knew it well, everybody knows it; it is one of the new beauties of Paris, an immortal group by Baldeau. It is before the Gothic door of the Cercle de France. The club put it up. The dominating figure is the Marquis de Chantelle, a young, eager, vivid figure, bareheaded, in the nondescript uniform of Maunoury's sixth army, straining, vital, above a basic group of thin, weird, gnome-faced men. It's a work of genius. It looks east toward Prussia. Everybody knows about it.

There was a faint chill in the air. The desert had been hot under the sun. Our horses had floundered in the sand, suffering from the light that blinded them and the thirst that we could only sparingly quench. It was less than fifty leagues south of Algeria; but it might have been in the brazen bowels of the Sahara.

De Morney was going out to get the Arab tribes united under French authority. He took me with him. The thing was a whim with me. One of those bizarre notions of ennui—I had been idling at Nice—and a letter from the English minister to De Morney, and the wanderlust took me to Algeria.

It does a soft white man good sometimes to know what thirst is, what heat and hunger are—all the hard clutch of the devil's fingers on him.

Behind De Morney the salt Zar'ez looked like water. It looked like a fairy sea in an Arabian story with a shimmering, faintly tinted haze on it—God-given water where there was no living thing, no thing with a drop of moisture. The heavenly illusion and the cruel fact behind it moved you with a hovering menace. And every now and then there came that far-off, vague, mysterious drumming.

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De Morney went on as though there had not been a long break in his words, precisely like an Oriental:

"Every country has the great legend. There's Arthur under Land's End. We have it, too. I was in the Cercle de France on the day they uncovered that group opposite the Madeleine. It was a day laid over with gold leaf for the old Marquis de Chantelle. It's a wonderful day when the idle, wandering son of a decadent family appears suddenly to make it immortal; to put it in the van of national glory, to make you think of it forever after, when you think of France. I remember how the old marquis looked when he was going out. Some one came in then, but he didn't see him, he didn't see anything. He was already in the Elysian fields. His glorious dead son had him by the hand, leading like a victory."

De Morney stopped.

The fire of dried camels' dung and the bleached bones that the Arabs had gathered up smoldered in a heap, with now and then a finger of flame running up a white rib.

There was no expression in his face. It was placid, like something eternally unconcerned, something imaged out of the illimitable indifference of the Sahara.

"The old marquis didn't see the man that came in," he went on, "but I saw him. He was in a hurry. He had something big, flat and square under his arm, tied up in a dirty paper. He got out of a fiacre before the Madeleine and he ran across the street.

"It was night.

"We were in the yellow dining room of the club. It's a ceremonial dining room, a weird room—fantastic, I think.

"Golfond tried to get the spirit of glory into its mural decorations. He made wonderful walls. France is the central motive. France awakened, reborn in the hell's crucible of this devil's war. France glorified. France a winged thing rising from the strangled body of the Prussian horror.

"It was Bertram de Cary's dinner, the late governor of Paris. Four men were at the table. I got up. I was looking out of the window. I could see the garlands of priceless roses hanging on the figure of De Chantelle, and the elfin group straining about him.

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"That's how I came to see the old marquis going out, and the other, with the flat thing tied up in dirty paper under his arm, coming in. Ten seconds later everybody in the room saw him. He burst in. He tumbled in like something flung upward by a sudden convulsive wrench of the earth under us; something disgorged by the underworld into the light—unnaturally by an abortive shudder. You know what I mean."

The light of the fire fell steadily on De Morney's face, and he moved on the rug.

"That's all a fancy, you understand. The thing was not like that. I am merely indicating what I thought; how the thing impressed me. And those are precisely the impressions that hurtled into the room with the man. He was not a distorted, indistinguishable creature from a twilight country. There was nothing gnome-like or fantastic about the man. We all knew him. He was one of your Americans, a painter, Sebastian Winthrop."

De Morney paused.

"We thought he was dead. We thought he had gone to America to die in some New England village among his people. He was a great painter until the white plague got him, then he threw his brushes into the Seine.

"He was a strange, somber, human creature. The pressure of severe traditions was on him, the background of inevitable disaster that the Puritan sees about him everywhere. He lived like a monk. The lure of Paris didn't exist for him."

De Morney was silent like a man in a profound reflection.

"Sebastian Winthrop closed the door, then he put his flat package wrapped up in dirty paper on the table. Everybody got up. This vanished painter was a memory. He had had an hour of glory before he left Paris. For an hour everybody applauded. He had the world before his canvases. Paris echoed with the man's genius. For that hour he was the greatest painter in the world. But there was always a seizure of invisible disaster on him; somber fancies behind his portraits, suggestions of the pit under the faces of his Madonnas. He set Paris aflame with the wonder of the thing; then the white horror tapped him on the shoulder and he went home to die.

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"We were all astonished—too much astonished to speak. The memory of the man came back with the new sight of him. There was a bottle of cognac on the table. He poured out a tumbler of it and drank it down like water. He looked like a pit-imprisoned creature. He had the emaciated face with the livid color. He coughed like a man in a room full of smoke. I thought the brandy was going to choke him. But he got it down, then he looked round at us.

"'I tried to get here sooner,' he said—'to get here while Paris was putting garlands on that bronze out there. I wanted to show you the thing that was behind that piece of thrilling courage; the thing that conceived it, and staged it, and forced it through. Paris is honoring the creatures of the thing, not the thing itself.'

"He indicated the bronze hung with garlands. A gust of rain had followed him in. It swept the bronze. Now it glistened in the light, then it fell into the shadow under the rain and the gusts of wind.

"'It's the fingers Paris has glorified out there,' he said. 'I wanted to get here so I could show you the hand that moved the fingers.'

"He spoke like a man who had made an adventure in his effort to arrive—a difficult, laborious, extended adventure.

"'You know where I have been,' he said, and he began to cough. He took up a napkin and dabbed his mouth. There was a faint stain of blood on it. 'I didn't go to America'; and he thrust his spread-out fingers downward. 'I went under there—I used to wonder about it when I was living like Galahad, in the hope of seeing heavenly visions. Then this thing got me and I changed. The religion of service led me to the plague. Whither would the religion of pleasure lead me? There was no God; I'd see if there was any devil!'"

De Morney came back to me.

"You know how such things happen," he said—"how a man can go down in Paris as he goes down from a torpedoed liner in the sea—suddenly, out of sight and hearing. That's the horror of Paris. The city has a fluid floor. You can slip through it and you're out of the world. You're not dead; but you're worse than dead—you're in the kingdom of Satan, and you're alive in it, and you're

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in it to stay. Nobody ever gets safely out again. Now and then a man comes up, crawls up through some slimy eddy, or he is ejected up by some contortion through the fluid floor. Just as Sebastian Winthrop was thrown up that night into the yellow room of the Cercle de France."

De Morney rested his broad chin in the fork of his great thumb and forefinger. He had heavy eyebrows, a thick, matted mustache, and a bush of hair below his under lip, but the outlines and the planes of his face were Oriental.

"That's where Paris differs from the sea," he said. "The sea keeps what it swallows; but now and then one of these lost creatures comes to the surface in Paris. He crawls up, or some shudder of the crust uncovers him, and he hops about. No man ever comes up a man; he comes up a coughing, livid creature with some unspeakable infection of the devil on him. He is a deep-sea thing like the creatures at the bottom of the ocean, and the air kills him.

"Sebastian Winthrop came up like that, coughing, livid, into the yellow room at Bertram de Cary's dinner.

"There were four of us in the yellow room that night: Bernhaus, the director of fine arts in Paris; Bertram de Cary, who had been governor of Paris on the eve of the Marne; and Vaudrec Saint Urban, Judge of the Superior Court—the committee of Paris on national monuments. I was a guest."

For a time De Morney was silent. Then he went on, taking me back into the tense drama staged over Paris in the yellow room of the Cercle de France:

"Winthrop had been straining across the table toward Bertram de Cary. Now he turned to Vaudrec Saint Urban, the Judge of the Superior Court.

"'On the night of the fifth of September,' he said, 'a man came to you in your chamber at the Palais de Justice and asked you to enter an order directing the release of Jean Jaques Sauer. You refused. Why did you refuse?'"

De Morney paused.

"You never saw Vaudrec Saint Urban. He is dead now. He was very old, withered like a dried-out apple. He looked like a dead man in the big chair at the end of the table.

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"'I refused,' he said, 'because the police believed that they had in this Jean Jaques Sauer one of the most abandoned criminal degenerates in Paris.'

"Winthrop coughed.

"'But you did release him.'

"'Yes,' replied the judge. 'On the morning of the sixth of September Antin Duflos, a doubtful dealer in jewels, in the Rue de Rivoli, appeared before me and deposited twenty thousand francs as bail for this Jean Jaques Sauer. There was no definite charge against the creature, and I was forced to follow the law of the republic.'

"Sebastian Winthrop straightened up. He held to the table.

"'Do you know why the old fence in the Rue de Rivoli wished the release of this criminal, degenerate Sauer?'

"'I do not,' replied the judge.

"Sebastian Winthrop steadied himself on his feet. Then he turned about to Bernhaus, when he got his cough a little under control.

"'There's a picture of Charlemagne in the Luxembourg,' he said. 'It represents him asleep on his golden throne under Aix-la-Chapelle, waiting to be awakened in France's hour of need.'

"Sebastian Winthrop stopped and dabbed his mouth with a napkin.

"We were all under the spell of the creature's resurrection. I suppose he impressed us like a dead man coming back to life. His words had that meaning, and his blue color, and the hell cough. Bernhaus was the first to get himself in hand.

"'What's wrong with the picture?' he said.

"There was a weak stutter in Winthrop behind the cough.

"'There is nothing wrong with it,' he said. 'It's a fine, distinguished picture. I don't mean the figure, the conception of Charlemagne; I mean that immortal germinal idea. The theme's true! Something did awaken to save France; but not from under Aix-la-Chapelle. I know'; and again he coughed. The napkin became a wad of linen in his livid fingers, dampened with the red spots.

"He turned to Bertram de Cary:

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"'You visited the recruiting stations in the city, when Paris was trying to make up Maunoury's army. You put everything into it, you dragged Paris. Then Joffre asked for a regiment to reënforce a wing of Foch's army and you were in despair. There was nothing to recruit a regiment out of. You had dusted the bin for the sixth army that Maunoury was taking out of Paris in the remaining taxicabs. There was no place to get a regiment for Foch. You visited the recruiting stations on the fifth of September and they were empty. And that day Von Kluck was within thirty miles of Paris. You were mad, hopeless, and in despair. Then something happened. Men began to come in, undersized, queer-faced men.'

"Again Sebastian Winthrop stopped to cough. A volume of blood flooded the napkin; he threw it down, picked up another, then he went over to the window.

"'There, down there,' he said, 'straining in the group round the Marquis de Chantelle.' He made a gesture toward Bertram de Cary. 'You didn't look at them,' he said, 'on the afternoon of the sixth of September.'

"The man's voice stuttered behind his cough.

"'You didn't know it then, Monsieur Bertram de Cary; but you knew it later, you know it now. You were recruiting a wonderful regiment. You had sent Foch a foreign legion out of Morocco to help him hold the Prussians, and now you were sending him a regiment out of the underworld to help him.'

"For a moment the man's voice rang clear. There was a straggling brush of beard over the creature's livid jaws. He tried to keep the red stains out of it.

"'You were amazed, you were astonished, Monsieur Bertram de Cary. You asked this mysterious current what it was that turned it into your recruiting stations. And it said "Orders, Monsieur." You thought it was your orders, Joffre's orders, orders of the war department; but it was not. That wonderful regiment didn't know anything about you, or Joffre, or the war department; but it obeyed the Thing that sent it.'

"His voice rang again, clear, through the wallow of the cough:

"'I know who gave the orders, Monsieur Bertram de Cary.'

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"He had gotton the napkin wadded up in his hand again. He looked like a thing with death on him—with death long on him. He was wasted by the attrition of the white horror. Only the eyes in his head seemed alive and vital. Voluntary sentence, living, to the pit, had changed everything else about him. But these wonderful brown eyes were not a whit changed.

"They seemed immortal in the dead face. They gleamed out under the arch of the eyebrows.

"One felt that these eyes were all right, no matter how damaged the human creature was. The cough that flung the man about now was out of the plague-infected body. The eye was sound. It was as sound as a jewel. One believed that these wonderful eyes could see inspiring visions over again. The same genius was in them, the same dominating, compelling genius. They moved you with admiration. They filled your soul with wonder. You felt that Sebastian Winthrop had carried two heavenly creatures down into the pit with him."

The big, squat man over beyond the fire of dried camel bones lapsed into one of those periods of Oriental silence. He was motionless, the whole desert under the saffron light was motionless round him. The white fleeces were unmoving on the sand. The moon was a thing in a theater. It was too big, too near to us, and too yellow. The whole scene was overdrawn and it was motionless. It was like a thing in the inconceivable vacuum of some imagined, dead world.

And the distant drumming—this symbol of the Imam, the militant savior in whose advent all Arab tribes devoutly believe—profoundly impressed me. It is the echo of innumerable grains of sand blown against the parched leaves of the desert grasses. But tonight, before De Morney, under the spell of his verbal drama, it was the drums of the legendary leader, keeping heart in Islam until the hour should come.

De Morney went on:

"Sebastian Winthrop got hold of a chair and sat down.

"'You're thinking of Charlemagne,' he said, 'on his golden throne under Aix-la-Chapelle, as he is in the Luxembourg. But there is a note wrong with that legend. It's German territory—

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Aix-la-Chapelle. It's all German territory along that border; even the ruin of Charlemagne's palace at Selz, in Alsace, is under the dominion of the King of Prussia.

"'No help from Charlemagne, Monsieur Bertram de Cary. France had to depend upon something within the boundaries she had left. And who was left? Where did you get the wolf-faced men for Foch's army? Not from Charlemagne under Aix-la-Chapelle!'"

De Morney looked at me across the fire with his heavy, expressionless, Oriental eyes.

"It was an inconceivable situation," he said. "Nobody would believe it. I don't precisely understand the thing now. I mean Winthrop's bursting in like that and the spell he got us under. I suppose we were keyed up to a romantic note. It doesn't take long for a Frenchman to reach the haze of it, once he is started on the way.

"The dreamer, Bernhaus, was on his feet, his eyes eager. He cried out an answer to Winthrop.

"'You mean Pepin the Short,' he said. 'He was a Frank—a wolf-faced Frank, and he's under France.'

"Sebastian Winthrop laughed among the paroxysms of his cough. You couldn't tell what the laugh meant. He kept throwing his head forward. It looked like a confirmation of Bernhaus. Then he looked round at us with the napkin to his lips. He held it there tightly for a good while. Then he went on.

"'Under France,' he said; 'that's the right place. That's where the Basilica Saint-Malo is, under the old part of Paris, near the Bastille. It used to be a cathedral, or something like that, before it got wedged down—crowded down by the new Paris that is always climbing up. You imagine that it's closed; that nobody goes in it. But you're mistaken; it's a council house, it's the seat of an empire. I know. I was in it on the night of the fifth of September, and the Thing that saved France was in it. It was full; it was crowded with the men you got in your regiment, on the sixth of September, for Foch's army. You called them wolf-faced Franks. I don't quarrel with the poetry of the description, if one keeps thinking about Pepin the Short.'

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"He looked at Bertram de Cary.

"'You spoke for the republic at Nice, at Bordeaux, at Dijon. Other great orators spoke for France, winged words, fine and noble. A lot of it trickled down through the floor of Paris, when the Prussian armies began to advance on the second of August. But no words spoken in France equaled what the Presence in the Basilica Saint-Malo uttered that night, sitting in the dust and cobwebs and gloom, in an old worm-eaten chair at the end of the great chamber, before that crowd of wolf-faced men—I'll call them that, Monsieur Bertram de Cary.

"'"*Mes enfants,*" it said, "you will go up tomorrow and save France. You know how to use a knife. You are the equal of any soldiers on the face of the earth with the knife. *Ecoutez!* A bayonet is a knife with a handle. It's a knife with a musket for a handle!"

"'That's all it said, Monsieur Bertram de Cary. No rounded periods, no elegant expressions to be copied on the bases of Parisian monuments. I was there. I was making a sketch with a piece of charcoal.' He broke off suddenly and put a question to Bernhaus. 'What are the distinguishing characteristics of an angel?' he said—'I mean the big angels of the Pentateuch?'

"'Serenity,' replied the director of fine arts, 'power!'

"Sebastian Winthrop nodded.

"'I wanted France to have a look at this Thing, this Thing that had awakened to save her naked body from the rape of the Prussian horror!

"'Nobody said a word in the whole human pack.

"'"You have got to have a leader," the Thing went on. "Somebody with the blood of the old nobles in him. I'll get you the young Marquis de Chantelle."

"'Then it stood up.

"'"They will have another leader up there," it said. "But when the Prussians charge, follow the little marquis . . . and remember, *mes enfants*, a bayonet is a knife on the end of a musket barrel!"'

"Sebastian Winthrop put out his hand and took another swallow of the brandy.

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"'That's what happened on the night of the fifth of September, when every man among you was at the end of his rope.'

"He put down the glass, indicating the men about him.

"'You were walking about in your room at the war department, kneading your hands, Bertram de Cary. Bernhaus was doubled up in his chair, in his studio, with his face in his arms. Monsieur Vaudrec Saint Urban was awake in his bed, thinking of the march of the Prussians along the boulevards of Versailles in 1870. Every one of you had reached the dead point. Joffre had sent his message to the government at Bordeaux—his determined, immortal message. You had done everything you could. The die had to be cast. You had dusted Paris. There was no regiment to send Foch—you were all standing still. But this Thing I saw didn't stand still. It traveled over Paris that night. It had no war horse to ride; it had no roaring chariot with a cushioned tonneau. The only thing it had was a broken-down fiacre, and an old horse that your cavalry wouldn't take. But the Thing dominated by this determined, patriotic spirit didn't care. It searched the subterranean corners of Paris.

"'And what happened, Monsieur Bertram de Cary? The next morning these wolf-faced men, as you call them, these little wolf-faced men of Pepin the Short, swarmed up from under Paris and made your regiment for Foch. You gave them the muskets of 1870—that's all you had—and they ground the bayonets!'

"Sebastian Winthrop got on his feet. His voice broke in a full note through the ghastly cough.

"'You got that regiment to Foch just on the stroke of time. It was there on the morning of the eighth of September. The whole desperate Battle of the Marne hung on an acre of earth. It hung on the plateau overlooking the marshes of Saint Gond. Everybody knew it. Foch knew it. The Germans knew it. The Prussian Imperial Guard charged it with massed picked troops. The plateau, above the marshes of Saint Gond, was a slaughter pen, a shambles, a hell sector. But the Prussian Guard didn't take it. They never could take it. The wolf-faced regiment held it. It held it with the bayonet.' Sebastian Winthrop screamed

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the words out. 'The bayonet! What is it, *mes enfants*, but a knife with a musket for a handle? It held it with that youth down there, picked out by the great Presence for a leader!'

"He began to stagger round the table, toward Monsieur Vaudrec Saint Urban, holding on to the cloth.

"The old judge rose as he approached.

"Sebastian Winthrop seemed to get his balance and a certain vital energy; he seized the judge by the arm, led him to the window and pointed down into the street. We followed, crowding round them. The light flickered and glistened on the bronze group. Sebastian Winthrop pointed out the dominant figure of the young Marquis de Chantelle.

"'Look at the face!' he stuttered. 'Look at the face!'

"The amazed old man strained over the window sill. 'It's the criminal degenerate, Jean Jaques Sauer!' he cried.

"Then he stood up and wiped the sweat off his face. He trembled under the emotion.

"'What does it mean?' he said.

"Sebastian Winthrop laughed. He got back to the table and his glass of brandy.

"'It means,' he cried, 'that the regiment, recruited out of the men with the wolfish faces, needed a leader, and the Thing, set on saving France, selected the young Marquis de Chantelle; that is to say, Jean Jaques Sauer!'

"He paused and took a swallow of the brandy. . . .

"'I was there,' he said; 'I know. The old marquis thought his son was out of France. He thought he was big-game hunting in Matabeleland; but he was not. He was never out of Paris. The old marquis thought he suddenly appeared to join this regiment. He did, but not from Matabeleland.'

"Sebastian Winthrop staggered and held on to the table. He drank the brandy. He fought the cough down in his throat, and he laughed. They were in no doubt about what the laugh meant this time. He hurled it defiantly at Bertram de Cary.

"'You didn't know the men you recruited for that regiment: wolf-faced Franks from the army of Pepin the Short! That's the poetry of the legend. If you had looked at their hands you

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would have seen the tatoo mark on the outside in the trough between the thumb and index finger. You would have seen the pigeon, the three dots, the two dots, the blue initial.'

"Sebastian Winthrop stood up and poured the last of the fiery liquor down his raw throat. Then he threw the glass against the wall.

"'They saved France!' he cried. 'They saved it with the bayonet!' He flung up his livid hand with the gesture of a victory. '"*Ecoutez, mes enfants!* A bayonet is a knife with a musket for a handle!" . . . And It sent them. That determined, patriotic Thing awakened under Paris sent them. Gavil de Verney didn't paint it—Charlemagne on his golden throne under Aix-la-Chapelle. De Maltry didn't paint it—Pepin the Short, at the head of his wolf-faced Franks!'

"The man's voice ended in an awful sort of bursting gurgle.

"'I painted it,' he said. And he ripped the dirty paper off the flat parcel that he had carried in and held it up!"

De Morney paused. Morning had arrived—a vague gleam of light was running over the desert. In a moment, on the edge of the ocean of sand the sun would appear. He got slowly on his feet.

"I maintain," he said, "that the portrait Sebastian Winthrop brought with him, through the fluid floor of Paris, was one of the few works of genius ever painted on this earth. It accomplished the dream of every living painter. It gave the material aspect of a face, and the spirit behind it."

"Was it Pepin the Short?" I said.

"Pepin the Short!" he echoed. "It was an old, loathsome woman with puffy eyes, baggy jowls, and a drooling mouth. No line, no feature, no contour was omitted. It was all faithfully presented in every abominable detail. . . . That was the face. But behind the face was the presence of a spirit, the presence of a great, calm, dominating spirit—the spirit before the threshing-floor of the Jebusite.

"It was the vilest human face in all the brothels of Sodom, illumined with the purpose of a heavenly angel!"

"But the great legend?" I cried. "Who was it?"

And De Morney answered:

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"Something burst in Winthrop's damaged throat, and he fell. He fell headlong and he carried the Thing down with him. The broken frame ripped it up. I know only what Bertram de Cary cried out—in horror, in wonder:

"'It's the unspeakable *marmite*, *Mère des Loups*—mother of the wolves—the head of all the Apache assassins of Paris!'"

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